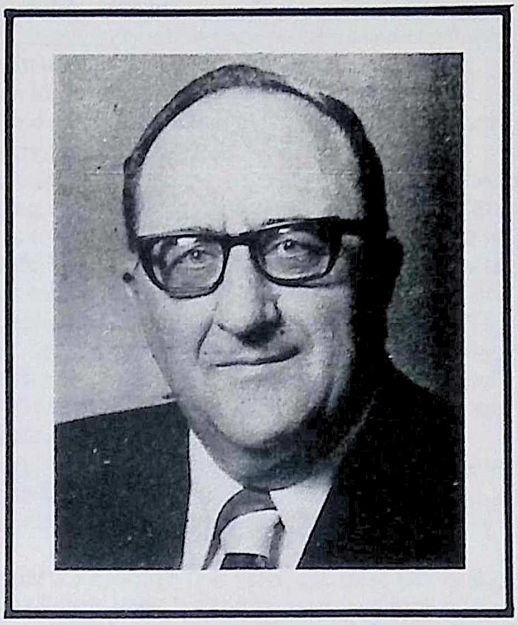
Melvin E. Heiler

1918-1994

Rotarian since May 3, 1974



On May 3 of this year, Mel Heiler completed 20 years as a North Scott Rotarian. Before his recent illness, he had three years of perfect attendance, not because he was working on perfect attendance, but because that's the way he did everything – he got involved and served.

As a Rotarian, Mel served in many ways. He was instrumental in the forming of our Educational Foundation. He headed our Community Needs Committee. He arranged programs. He shared invocations. He was a member of the Board of Directors.

Rotary was just one way Mel served.

His career as an educator in North Scott is legendary. He was a math and science teacher at schools in Britt before coming to the one-year old North Scott School District in 1957 as high school principal. One small problem. There was no high school. Two hundred students were tuitioned to Davenport, 100 to DeWitt, 50 to Bettendorf, 35 to Wheatland, and a couple to Bennett, LeClaire and Clinton. The high school opened on Sept. 8, 1958, except the gym. The basketball team practiced at the Eldridge Turner Hall. The football team practiced on a cow pasture and there were six students who could play a musical instrument.

And oh yes, there weren't any teachers. Mel had to hire a faculty without a building to show. In an interview, Mel recalled that experienced teachers didn't want to have anything to do with North Scott, so they hired a lot of inexperienced teachers and did very well.

The same "phantom planning" was true for the transportation system. One of Mel's first jobs was working on bus routes for 25 busses which the district didn't have until the next year. One of the early recollections many of us have of North Scott is Mel Heiler mapping bus routes on a pin map of the 210-square mile district. From these humble origins, a school system was born.

In 1964, he became North Scott's second superintendent when Charles Hahn left to pursue his doctorate. Mel served as superintendent with distinction until his retirement in 1980. His 17 years as North Scott Superintendent of Schools is a record, but most remarkable is not the length of Mel's tenure, but the enormous change that took place during those years. It was a period when North Scott was transformed from a collection of 57 one-room country schools, to one of the most respected school districts in the state.

When Mel became superintendent in 1964, district-wide enrollment was 1,864. In sixteen years it doubled to 3,631. It was no small task providing for this influx that followed the expansion of the Caterpillar plant and the rapid growth throughout the North Scott area. But Mel was a builder and up to the task of overseeing numerous construction projects as well as a solid educational program that would take place in those buildings.

In 1968, after four failed bond issues, four elementary buildings were constructed, at Eldridge, Long Grove, Donahue and Princeton. Two years later, major additions were made at the high school.

In 1972, a referendum for a junior high in Eldridge and elementary school in Park View was defeated. Things didn't always go as planned, but Mel and other leaders kept working. Nine months later, voters approved bonds for a junior high school and less than a year later for an elementary school at Park View. Things are going well? Not quite. An Iron Workers Union strike delayed the opening of the junior high and forced the school to operate under split shifts until the junior high opened in November 1975. Meanwhile,

elementary students were being bussed all over the district and met in places like the old Donahue Savings Bank, Faith Lutheran Church in Eldridge and the Lutheran Church in Park View. Then Neil Armstrong School opened in August 1976.

In the summer of 1979, Mel announced that he would retire after one more year – but he was by no means finished with his work. Additions to the high school industrial arts and special ed areas followed, and then, as a crown jewel, Mel's final building project was the North Scott Fine Arts Auditorium. The bond issue was approved in October 1979 and the formal dedication was in May 1982. It is still the finest facility of its kind in the Quad Cities.

What is remarkable is that so much was accomplished without the support staff and facilities of today. Mel occupied a postage stamp sized cubby hole in the central office where Porter Insurance is now located. Books, papers and reports were stacked to the ceiling because there was no other place for them. For most of his years as superintendent, Mel did it all with just a district secretary and a transportation secretary. He had no operations director, computers or print center. Only in his final two years did he have a Business Manager. Mel produced sheet after sheet of budget reports in his distinctive, square manuscript and mimeographed them for board members. Board meetings, held in the work room at the central office, were long and detailed. But thanks to the hard work of many, many people, the system worked.

It would certainly be true to say that Mel Heiler was a builder, in everything he did. He and his wife Ada, members of St. John's United Methodist Church, were among a small group chosen by the conference to charter a new church in Eldridge. The church began in the summer of 1972 without a building, meeting in the basement of the Eldridge Coop. Mel, naturally, was on the building committee that developed plans for the first church building which opened in 1975. He and Ada were among the most faithful members of the church and provided leadership wherever it was needed through their remaining years.

Mel was active until his last days. Just a week ago today, despite the chemo treatments he was receiving, he was here at Rotary, in suitcoat and tie. I remember remarking to myself about how good he looked and how pleased I was that he was able to be here. I shouldn't have been surprised. Last February when we met at The Brandt Company he was here despite the worst blizzard of the winter.

But that is the way Mel wanted it. He could have gone anywhere in his retirement, but chose to stay in the community he helped build. He held several offices in the Eldridge Lions and was their "Man of the Year". He was active and had many friends in Senior Citizens groups. He was one of the most faithful walkers at the North Scott Fitness Center.

When a committee was named to plan a Community Center for Eldridge five years ago, Mel Heiler was a natural choice, and it was my privilege to work with him and draw upon his enormous experience in building projects for almost three years.

Mel lent his considerable expertise to the North Scott Education Foundation and the North Scott Hall of Fame Committee. Scott Campbell, who serves on that committee, remarked at how well Mel remembered athletes from the Sixties. He remembered more than just the athletes, of course. He had many fond memories of students as well. His signature is on about half of the diplomas ever issued from North Scott.

In many ways, Mel was a very ordinary person, but the things he accomplished were extraordinary. He was one of us. There were no airs or pretenses. He enjoyed afternoon coffee at Slagle's and evening chats with his neighbor and good friend, Charlotte Mohr. Wherever he went, he made friends.

Above all, I think, Mel would want to be remembered as good husband and father. During the last ten years of Ada's life, he took one day every month to drive her to Iowa City for a complete transfusion. This was during some of his busiest years with work. As long as I've known him, Mel has been eager to share news about his daughter, Lynn, and son, Greg, who have accomplished so much. When Greg visited our Rotary club, it was always with pride that Mel would say, "I'd like to introduce my son Greg, the doctor. . ."

It was our good fortune to have known Mel as a community builder, educator, family man, fellow Rotarian, and an ordinary person, whose record was truly extraordinary.

Eulogy given by Bill Tubbs

at Rotary Club of North Scott meeting, June 17, 1994